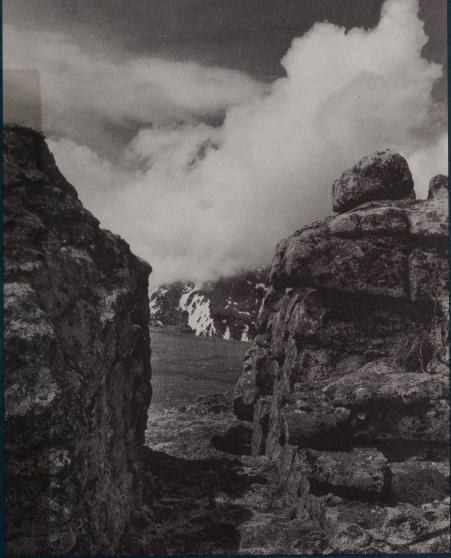
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SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

SACRED JOURNEY[™]

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is
to encourage and support
a spiritual orientation to life,
to promote the practice of
prayer,
meditation,
and service to others,
and to help bring about
a deeper spirit of unity
among humankind.

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Cover photo by Sara Wuthnow.

FROM THE PRESIDENT





Do you pray? Almost everyone does. Why? What motivates us? William James, whose classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) remains one of the best books on the subject yet written, defines prayer, in part, as "the very movement of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the

presence." Without this interior prayer, James said, "there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion." Living religion, or spirituality, James found, has to do with one's personal experience of God rather than a learned acceptance of the creeds and dogmas of institutional religions.

Almost one hundred years later, (despite–or perhaps because of–the awesome and scary advances of science and technology) the power of prayer continues to stir and tug at our hearts, even though many of us have dropped out of the conventional churches of our youth.

Talking about his teaching experiences with today's "Generation X," Harvard professor, author, and theologian Harvey Cox tells us that his students remain enormously intrigued with the world's religions—especially their mystical expressions—but not with the mainline churches and

temples. They want to pick and choose, he says, and are less willing to accept religions, either as full-blown systems of truth or as authoritative institutions.

They are, however, like you and me, very much concerned with such questions as "Who am I?" "How do I believe this life ought to be lived?" "With what purpose in mind?" "Is what I'm doing moving me closer to God or further away?" In search of answers, they take a keen interest in the insights of depth psychology and the accelerating breakthroughs in science and medicine, as well as in reading and learning about the spiritual experiences of other seekers and other faith traditions throughout time and space.

In the midst of this often confusing, not to say overwhelming tangle of choices and directions, however, they sense the need of a steady, ongoing spiritual practice, and they instinctively turn to prayer, meditation, and contemplation, alone and in small groups, as committed, intentional ways of deepening their relationship to God.

With all this in mind, Fellowship in Prayer will celebrate its 50th anniversary in June of the year 2000 in Princeton, New Jersey, with a major conference titled: *Companions on the Sacred Journey*. Well-known speakers, authors, and spiritual practitioners from a broad spectrum of scientific, artistic, and faith traditions will share with us the wisdom and beauty of their experiences on the path. You're invited to join them, and us, in Princeton, on the 16th, 17th, and 18th of June, in the year 2000. Set aside the date, now!

God between you and all harm,

Paul Walsh

FROM THE EDITOR





The past year has made me adept at border crossings. In my vocational world as editor of Sacred Journey, the spiritual aspects of life (body, mind, and spirit) are explored freely. In the world of medicine, where I have spent countless hours with my youngest child as she has successfully battled leukemia, one

must speak freely of body functions and pharmacology. My few mentions of prayer or questions of meaning voiced in the hospital were met with uneasy silence. I am thankful for your prayers and the able care of local ministers and friends who bridged these worlds with goodness.

Traveling between worlds has made me savor opportunities to speak with doctors who are as fluent in the language of meaning as they are in the language of medicine. Recently, I talked by phone to Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. as she worked from her office outside of San Francisco. In this month's *Question & Answer* feature, "Below the Surface," Rachel Remen speaks about healing as a movement of the Spirit and of life as a sacred journey.

In this issue I am pleased to introduce some meaning-makers, writers who use words to point to lasting truth and ever-present beauty. Mary Jo Meadow uses the champak flower to outline five characteristics for spiritual practice. Lorette Piper, in *A Transforming Experience*, tells of love overcoming despair in a jailhouse encounter. And in a special feature, *Explorations & Renunciations*, Sara Wuthnow introduces us to her spiritual journey through prose, poetry, and nature photographs.

As you read, tuck this quote by Dr. Remen into the back of your mind, "Stories are the bridge to the unseen. . . . They remind us of who we are, why we are here, and that we are not alone."

Blessings,

Rebecca Laird

With deep gratitude we thank Mrs. Jane Liu for her very generous gift of \$1,000 in memory of her husband, James T.C. Liu (1919-1993). A long-time friend, officer, and trustee, James' wise counsel and commitment to Fellowship in Prayer will be long remembered.

Rachel Naomi Remen



BELOW THE SURFACE QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



Rachel Naomi Remen

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., is a pioneer in the field of mind/body health and author of Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal, the 1997 winner of the Wilbur Award for excellence in communicating religious issues, values and themes. From her grandfather, an orthodox rabbi, Rachel learned to "search for what is Real." She worked for many years as a pediatrician and discovered that people's stories were "far more compelling to me than the disease process." She was one of the first to develop a psychological approach to people with life-threatening illness and to educate physicians about their needs. She is the co-founder and medical director of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program and a Clinical Professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine.

Sacred Journey: How do stories help us heal?

Rachel Remen: First, let me define healing: Healing is the innate movement toward wholeness or integrity which is present in everything that lives. You can think of that movement as the spirit of God in life. This movement is especially true of human beings. We have an innate natural movement toward wholeness,

toward the soul, toward connection with God, if you want to think of it that way. One of the royal roads to further wholeness has to do with the realm of meaning. When we begin to find meaning in life, we are often strengthened in our movement toward integrity and wholeness.

Are you saying stories are a way to find meaning in our lives?

Stories are the containers for meaning. The difference between a group of facts or any factual description that is in the dictionary and a story is found in the meaning a story can contain. A real story contains something larger than itself. It has coherence that is larger than the facts. It has an asthetic dimension.

Let me give you an example. A teacher told me of teaching the idea of asthetic perception to seven year old children. The teacher gives each child in the classroom a glass of clear water and tells them they can't talk about what they are going to see happen in the glass. They have to watch for the change, then write down what they see. Then they can talk about what they've seen.

The teacher walks through the class and puts a drop of red ink in each child's glass. They watch what happens and then write about it. Then there is a tremendously excited discussion. Everyone has seen something somewhat different. Some children see angels and some see grandpa's face and some see the wind. The children are very excited about what they are seeing in their glasses. After a half hour of this the teacher says to the children, "Well what is this all about? After all,

you are only talking about a drop of ink in a glass of water, aren't you?" And so, stories are our way of seeing below the surface, beyond the facts of life to the meaning of life and beyond the meaning of life to the source of life. This is why almost all the religions have done their teachings in terms of parables and stories. They are the bridge to the unseen, and as such, they move us toward our wholeness. They remind us of who we are, why we are here, and that we are not alone.

Do all stories have the capacity to heal?

Any real story has the capacity to heal. Now there are an awful lot of things that aren't real stories. Real stories are about life and about people. They are true to life. Soap operas, for instance, are not healing stories because they feed parts of us that aren't our assets. They feed greed and vanity and envy. They are meant to do that. Life does not necessarily feed those aspects of our lives. Anything real, a person's story, your life story, can heal. If I were to study your life I could derive the basic principles of the spiritual teachings from it.

Does every person's life, if reflected upon, have some dimension of the holy written upon it?

Exactly. God is talking to us all the time through our experiences. Often we don't hear God unless he shouts at us in the form of a miracle. But God is whispering to us all the time, and he speaks to us through all our relationships, all of our challenges. This is not a dead world.

How does a person who is ill and wants to get well begin to incorporate stories into the quest for healing?

Well, I think it is a very natural thing to do. When people are ill, especially those who are very ill, they instinctively reach for meaning. I've counseled people with cancer for twenty-five years now. When faced with a life-threatening disease, people who have never before considered this aspect of life instinctively reach toward meaning in order to endure the difficulties of daily life.

A story I tell in *Kitchen Table Wisdom* is a powerful example of how meaning transforms adversity: Three stone cutters are building a cathedral. They are each brought a rock to cut into blocks, each a foot by a foot by nine inches. The block is taken away and another brought in.

The first man is asked, "What are you doing?" He turns and with great bitterness replies, "You idiot! Look with your own eyes. You can see. They bring me a rock. I cut it into a block. I've been doing this since I was old enough to get working papers, and I'll be doing it until the time I die. I mean, use your eyes. You can see what I am doing."

Backing away from this bitter, hostile person, you go to the next person who is also cutting stone and ask, "What are you doing?" He smiles at you and says, "I am earning a living for my beloved family. With the money I am earning here, my children have food. They are growing strong and straight, and we have built a home to contain our love. I'm earning a living for my beloved family."

Then the third man is asked, "What are you doing?" He turns with a radiant face and says, "I'm building a great cathedral, a holy lighthouse, and it will stand for a thousand years. Anyone who is lost, anyone who is alone, anyone who cannot remember the source of life can come here and be healed. It will go on and on long after I am gone."

Now all three of these men are doing the same task. They are taking rocks and cutting them into blocks. Doing an ordinary task, which has in it a dimension of profound personal meaning, opens the daily ordinary routine aspects of life to joy. It also strengthens us to continue in the routine, to endure difficulties.

It sounds like healing is an everyday part of our lives, not just something we look for when we are sick.

We are always healing. We are always moving toward our wholeness. Life is always presenting us with challenges, with gifts, with relationships that move us toward wholeness, if we are listening. In other words, the whole of life is a teaching experience, a learning experience. And what we learn about is the Source.

Will we learn these life lessons even if we aren't ever faced with serious illness?

I don't make a generalization like that. Every human being is a child of God. Every human being is different. Some people are not listening and will never listen. Some people seem to have the ability to find profound meaning in very difficult events. There is a great

range of responses, but the potential for wholeness is always there for everyone.

You write of your many years of physical suffering with Crohn's disease. From your perspective can suffering become a resource and not just a burden?

I think you always wish that suffering were not a part of your life. But you know there is no how-to method to turn suffering into a resource. Having worked with thousands of people, I've learned that everyone does this in a personal way. Uniqueness is the quality of the soul. There are no two of us that are ever alike. We are each a unique and precious aspect of God, so there is no quick fix or quick answer to the problems of suffering.

I would say that suffering is central to most of the world's traditions. This is true of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and many other world religions. Suffering tends to awake us to something that goes on below the surface. Suffering is often the doorway to a deeper, richer life. What I've discovered through my own illness is that it is possible to live a good life, even though it is not an easy life. I think we get that confused here in the United States where we have relatively easy lives compared to the lives of the great majority of human beings in this world. We are very busy, but we are many times very empty, very exhausted, or very cynical. We may sense that we are not rich at all in ways that matter. So leading a good life has to do with living a life of meaning.

Suffering can help you live without taking anything for granted. I've seen this happen for many, many

people. People become much more aware of the great gift of being alive and being able to participate in life. I remember one woman saying to me, "You know I had a day yesterday where I was not in pain, and all the colors were so bright. Some people who are rushing around, they have this every day, and they don't even notice."

Suffering can be an awakening experience, but not for everyone. Many become bitter, and that is a phase of suffering. I was bitter and angry for many years, but after a point you recognize that you are losing more than you need to lose when you take that kind of an attitude. Your disease will limit you, but your attitude can completely ruin your life. I'd rather have the limitations of my disease than to lose everything because I feel entitled to live with bitterness and anger at what I've lost.

Before I began counseling people with life-threatening illnesses I was a pediatrician. I saw how children responded to illness. One little boy lost his leg when he was six, and his response was, "You know, I can't miss life because of this. I'm going to learn how to use an artificial leg. I've been very sick. But, you know, life is going on, and I must join it." His parents, on the other hand, were very bitter and angry for years.

The children are connected to life. Most of us are connected to our preferences. That's different. For us to live well we must be connected to life which will teach us the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is when things go our way. It's more about getting what we want. Joy is a peak sense of aliveness no matter what is going on. Happiness is quite fragile. Joy is not fragile at all.

Your comments on joy resonate with a biblical understanding of the word.

Everything I have learned is not from reading the Bible. Everything I have is from observing the way the world is. You know the Bible didn't happen thousands of years ago. It is still happening. The teachings are still happening. They are out there in the supermarkets. They are everywhere. The Bible is not a historical document; it is a statement about the nature of the world.

Earlier you mentioned that little boy who was connected to life while his parents remained angry and bitter. As you know, I am the parent of a child in treatment for leukemia. My daughter is doing well, but I sometimes get a glimpse of the dragon-sized dose of anger that lurks in me. What do I, and others who must suffer or watch their loved ones suffer, do with this anger?

It seems to me that there is a positive way to feel *all* emotions. All emotions serve a purpose and are potentially life affirming. Perhaps it is not so much the emotions themselves as the way that we deal with them that either is or is not life affirming.

My own ideal image of the positive and healthy way to have emotions is rather like Zorba the Greek. Get into it, experience it, have done with it, and let go of it. As a matter of fact, the experience of my own practice suggests that no emotion is bad or harmful—that the only bad emotion is a stuck emotion.

Anger is an emotion that has a very bad press. Yet my experience with many ill people suggests that many people recover by becoming angry first. Anger often represents an affirmation and attachment to life, a demand for a change, and an unwillingness to live under any but the best circumstances. Anger becomes a problem only when we become wedded to it. Anger often represents an engagement with life, not always the most comfortable style of engagement, but perhaps the only style the person can manage at that particular time. It is far healthier than apathy, hopelessness, and resignation.

Is there a particular sacred story or spiritual practice that helps connect you with life?

I think most of the stories that have awakened me have been stories that people have shared with me. I'll tell one in a minute, but let me talk briefly about karma yoga. As I understand it, karma yoga means that your practice is not something you can do at any one particular time, like on Saturday or Sunday, or whenever. Your practice is your whole life and all of life is a sacred journey, a sacred experience. Loss is a sacred path. Life is a sacred path. Karma yoga brings the search for meaning into the ordinary. You need to wake up because there is something to be awake to.

Let me share a simple story with you. One of the most lovely things about writing a book is that people write to you about what has happened to them in the process of reading your book. I received a letter from a man in the South who wanted to tell me about his experience with reading the book when his father devel-

oped cancer. His father is a very important person in his life. When he was small, they used to fish and play ball together. When they got older, they hunted and drank beer together. When his father became ill, the son wanted to tell him how much having him for a dad meant to him, but as he put it, "We're not talking men down here." He couldn't find the words and he became very depressed by his inability to tell his father what was on his heart. So he went to the social worker at the hospital and expressed this to her. She reached into the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a much read copy of Kitchen Table Wisdom and handed it to him and said, "Read this." He wasn't looking for a book, but he went home and started to read. He came across a story in the book that described a relationship like his with his dad. So he decided to read that story to his father. He read it and for the first time they started to talk a little about the relationship; then he read him another story and it brought up another aspect of life, and they talked about that. And he wrote, "Rachel, we read the whole book twice and my dad died six weeks ago. I want to thank you for giving me the words to talk about this important relationship."

You see, many of us have a great deal more meaning than we realize or that we can express. I think it is very important to learn ways of telling people how it is, of telling people how important they are. This is hard if we are really attached to having our love accepted because we are always afraid we are going to get rejected. What would it be like if God were attached to having his love accepted and didn't love people unless he was sure that his love would be accepted? Basically, you must never let somebody make you stop

loving them, simply because they can't hear you. That doesn't make your love any less important, it just requires your compassion.

What a wonderful story. Thank you for your time. I understand you are writing your next book. Can you tell us what it is about?

My next book is on service. I'm working hard on it.

Blessings to you.

PRAYERS

Prayer for Health Samuel Silver

O Lord our God, Thou art the fountainhead of life, the health and vigor of bodies and minds. From Thy wisdom derives the physician's skill to bind up our wounds and to restore our well-being.

Wherefore, like our fathers before us, we hail Thee as the great Physican of all mankind.

Give us wisdom to preserve the endowment of health which Thou hast bestowed on us. May we never forget that our bodies and their faculties are Thy gift entrusted to us for Thy service.

Help us, O Life of all that live, so to comport ourselves that we may be fitting vessels for Thy presence.

But if disease or pain be our allotted portion, then we pray Thee, grant us the courage to bear our burdens.

May we, though limited in strength, still find the resources to serve Thee and our fellowmen.

May we be untouched by bitterness and despair. May our pain open our hearts to the anguish and distress of others.

So that, tested in the crucible of our own trials, we may emerge cleansed and purified in purpose.

The "Prayer for Health" is by Rabbi Samuel Silver, a trustee of Fellowship in Prayer and author of Explaining Judaism to Jews and Christians. "The Ancient Hindu Prayer" was sent to us from Avtar Pandit, Secretary of Service to Humanity in Jaipur, India. "Prayer" is written by Christopher Cataline from Modesto, CA.

An Ancient Hindu Prayer

Lead us from unreal to Real, Lead us from darkness to the Light. Lead us from the fear of Death To knowledge of Immortality.

Prayer Christopher Cataline

Lord, still my tongue when the demand for center stage rears its ugly, twisted visage.

Help me to intercept the impulse to take your name in vain, to slander my brother for gain.

To turn from the true in favor of the false is in no small measure to pull from a well impure, a kind of kill that leaves me repulsed when in my reflection I come to see I don't draw from this well; it draws from me.

PSYCHOLOGICAL READINESS FOR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Mary Jo Meadow



Smiling, the teacher held out to me a milky-white flower with five petals spiraling from its golden center that shaded first into pink, then the white of the unfurled petals. This particular flower grows prolifically in Pondicherry, India, home of the Sri Aurobindo ashram. At times the streets are literally strewn with its

ethereal beauty as blossoms rain down from the trees bearing them.

I arrived at the Sri Aurobindo *ashram* in Pondicherry while on a sabbatical to study Indian psychology. I soon realized Sri Aurobindo had much to offer as a spiritual teacher and consulted with him on personal issues.

The Flower's Gift

It was not until later, after I had left Pondicherry, that I learned this flower is called the champak flower, and that it

Mary Jo Meadow has meditated nearly forty years in the Christian, yogic, and Theravadan Buddhist traditions. A Catholic sister also vowed to the Theravadan nuns' precepts, her most recent book is Through A Glass Darkly: A Spiritual Psychology of Faith (Crossroads, 1996).

has spiritual significance at the *ashram*. Teachers there confer spiritual gifts by handing to devotees a flower signifying the gifts they wish to offer. The champak flower was named "psychological perfection" by the Mother, the French woman who came to Pondicherry to share Sri Aurobindo's mission and manage his growing *ashram*. Both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother taught about psychological perfection, or the full personal readiness for spiritual practice.

Begin with Surrender

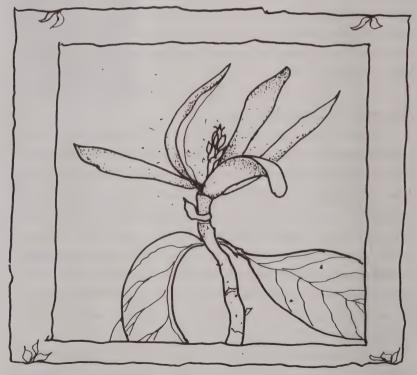
To do yoga, or spiritual practice—often called *sadhana* in India—Sri Aurobindo taught that the first indispensable condition for spiritual practice is a total surrender of one's being to God. The five psychological perfections, one for each petal of the champak flower, follow. They can be seen as a fleshing out or actualizing of the surrender that has already been made in spirit. The Mother taught about these perfections in some detail.

Sincerity or Transparency

The first petal stands for sincerity or transparency. This is a necessary beginning step. If we are not willing to be known by our spiritual guide, we cannot be helped. Life seems designed so that much of our spiritual help comes through the agency of others; God has chosen that method. This teaching is especially strong in India, with the tradition of the guru—the dispeller of darkness, the one who brings God into our life by his or her call for discipline and self-dedication. A key sign for the spiritual teacher that a devotee is sincere is his or her willingness to be "seen" by the guru in order to be taught.

How poorly we in America understand the venerable tradition! We have been overdosed on con artists and various renegades who have come to our shores posing as holy ones, and then leading us and our young people astray into avarice, sensual indulgence, unbridled sexuality, drugs, and even deliberate harming of others. We should beware of anyone who calls him—or herself a guru! The "real thing" is far too modest for such self-designation.

In India, surrender to God through a true guru opens a channel of divine guidance. Our willing self-revelation—warts, faults, and all—to the guru calls down the compassion of God. In the West, we have a similar tradition, that of the spiritual father or mother, often called a spiritual director or guide. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother taught that utter transparency, complete sincerity, is the starting point with the guide.



The White Champak Hower

Lucy graves me Vicker

Faith or Trust

The second petal stands for faith or trust. The faith or trust rests in God, in the inner teacher, to whom the guru works to lead us. Teachers at the *ashram* say there are three main stumbling blocks to appropriate faith.

First is an attitude that makes God responsible for everything. Here we refuse to take appropriate action for ourselves, expecting God to do all the work in us. When things go wrong, people who make this mistake are quick to blame God and decide that God is not good, or at least not good to them.

The second mistake is to look around at all the misery in the world or our own lives, and decide that God must be powerless. Those who make this mistake ask, "If God is good, then why must I suffer so much?" They expect claiming faith in God to mean that their lives should go as they wish without suffering, that God is supposed to make everything "right" according to their specifications.

The third mistake comes from a warped sense of humility. People in this camp hold themselves unworthy of God's care and attention. An appropriate faith must allow for our own and others' weaknesses and limitations, must be patient and realize that progress takes time, and must understand that initially we must put in a great deal of our own effort. Then, more and more, God takes over.

Devotion or Gratitude

The third perfection is devotion or gratitude. By itself, devotion can produce many excesses and mistakes. Sometimes it is used to swell ego, to feel especially important to God in comparison with other people. Sometimes it is even used to make demands of God in repayment.

When devotion is full of gratitude, these dangers are

averted. Gratitude fills our hearts with joy that simple everyday pleasures exist—such as a sunset, a bird's song, a child's laughter. Gratitude makes it possible to see God in all the little details of life. It shifts the focus of attention away from ourselves to God's indwelling of the world.

Courage or Aspiration

Courage or aspiration is the fourth prerequisite for spiritual practice. This propels us headlong into the supreme ad-

Much
of our
spiritual
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through
others.

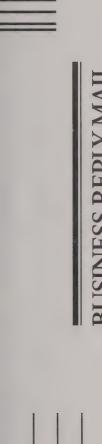
venture of seeking God, without regard for cost, without calculation, without even considering the possibility of retreat. The Katha Upanishad, a portion of Hindu sacred text, calls spiritual practice walking a razor's edge. The faint-hearted only dabble at the fringes, never plunging into the heart of endeavor. Every time-proven spiritual tradition has recognized the need for this qual-

ity. Christians call it the cardinal, or "hinge," virtue of fortitude.

Endurance or Perseverance

Finally, in order for the surrender to God to be truly complete, truly absolute, the psychological perfection of endurance or perseverance is needed. Beginning is important; it is the first step. But if we do not see it through to the finish, to the point where God has responded to the earnest cry of the seeking heart, and has embraced the seeker totally, the start has not come to fruition.

We must learn to face all difficulties without getting discouraged. We must stick to our path without feeling incapable or unworthy. We have to walk confidently in the dark, trusting that we will be protected. We must be willing to



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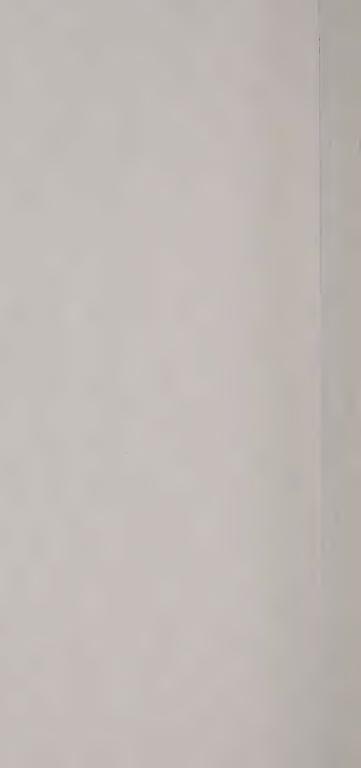
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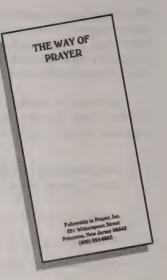
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* * * * * *

Please use this space to tell us your thoughts about this publication, *Sacred Journey*.

have nothing to hold onto at times. When we fall, we must pick ourselves up and continue going. We must not be content to stop in the beautiful meadows and byways through which we will pass on the spiritual path, but must realize that these are not the goal, are not God, and we must refuse to be distracted or deterred.

In Closing

So, we start with our surrender to God. We make that surrender truly real with the five psychological perfections, those qualities that make the surrender absolute, total, and irrevocable. Champak trees grow profusely in Pondicherry. The blossoms shower down regularly. The grace, the gift of the qualities we need, is available. We can count on its being given to us if we will but reach out our hands and take the gift that is offered us.

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

A Jail Chaplain's Meditation Lorette Piper



Sitting in our circle one night in the juvenile jail, Mark, a seventeen-year-old African-American, told us he was leaving soon, going home to face his enemies. He told me that he had done everything I suggested for one whole year, and still he found no God. And, he added, if there were a God, what kind of God would have set him up to live the

kind of life he had lived so far? Mark's parents had deserted him and his five siblings. Then, year after year, they had been abused in foster homes.

Exhausted and overwhelmed as I was that night, I began a ferocious inner dialogue with You–remember? "Mark is right! It's too hard for him and for all of us! Where are You? We need more help! Show us your love! Do something, say something! This is a showdown, right here and right now." I crossed my arms, and we waited in silence. And waited.

A teacher, writer, spiritual director, and chaplain, Sister Lorette Piper has written for SACRED JOURNEY over the years. She has won widespread recognition for a highly creative and effective prison ministry.

Suddenly, up leapt a sixteen-year-old Hispanic boy who planted himself, with hands clenched and biceps bulging, in front of Mark. I said to You, "How could You add injury to insult? Now I'll have to use the red phone. There's going to be a fight." But Jorge was simply positioning himself to speak urgently and formally to Mark. "Mark, I know there is a God because every pight I stand and

is a God because every night I stand and pray at my cell window and I look at the stars and I feel God's arms coming around me, and I feel God's love for me as the tears are running down my cheeks. And, Mark, I know there's a God because . . . I know there's a God because . . . I love you!"

When I step back, You step in.

And I felt Your laughter in my heart, and I heard Your words echoing in my mind: "For God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. . . . Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . We love because God first loves us. . . . For God is greater than our hearts and knows all things."

Once again You reminded me that my job is not Your job, that when I step back, You step in, and that the mystery of love at the center of our lives is radically near and radically other.



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ILLUMINATIONS

I found I had less and less to say, until finally, I became silent, and began to listen. I discovered in the silence, the voice of God.

- Soren Kierkegaard

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world: Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening . . . you wait, you give your life's length to listening.

- Annie Dillard

True contemplation can only thrive when defended from two opposite exaggerations: quietism on the one hand, and spiritual fuss upon the other.

- Evelyn Underhill

If you suffer, thank God—it is a sure sign you are alive.

- Elbert Hubbard

Not only action but also suffering is a way to freedom. In suffering, the deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our own hands into God's hands.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

God has no need for your suffering if you are thankful and believing.

- Koran 4:147

Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When our mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers. If you love someone but rarely make yourself available to him or her, that is not true love. When your beloved is suffering, you need to recognize her suffering, anxiety, and worries, and just by doing that, you already offer some relief. Mindfulness relieves suffering because it is filled with understanding and compassion. When you are really there, showing your loving-kindness and understanding, the energy of the Holy Spirit is in you.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

God also communicates with us by way of all things. They are messages of love. When I read a book, God is speaking to me through this book. I raise my eyes to look at the countryside: God created it for me to see. The picture I look at today was inspired by God in the painter, for me to see. Everything I enjoy was given lovingly by God for me to enjoy, and even my pain is God's loving gift.

- Ernesto Cardenal

EXPLORATIONS & RENUNCIATIONS:

Illustrations from the Book of Nature



Sara Wuthnow

I grew up in the bosom of the Reformed Presbyterian church, a Scottish Calvinist group commonly known as the "Covenanters." As a child, the story was told how my zealous ancestors in seventeenth century Scotland slit their veins in Greyfriar's churchyard so they could sign the "covenants" with their own blood. During the ensuing "killing times," 18,000 Covenanters perished. My childhood memory is that the blame was laid at the doorstep of the "papists." Since my mother could trace her ancestry back to those dark days, we were taught conduct befitting Covenanter bluebloods. Thus, many "Sabbath" afternoons were spent memorizing the answers to catechism questions such as, "What is man's chief end?" Even though I was a girl it never occurred to me that the answer didn't apply to me, so my sister and I would shout out with my brothers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." That particular catechism would send a chill through me as I imagined myself locked away in some celestial hereafter dourly singing Scottish

Sara Wuthnow is a poet and photographer, living in Princeton, NJ. She has been engaged in contemplative practices for a number of years and spends time regularly in a Benedictine monastery in Indiana.

psalms. As a child, I could think of a lot better things to be doing.

Many years later when I finally came to understand what that simple catechism meant I was far from my Calvinist moorings in a Benedictine monastery learning contemplative prayer. It is ironic that it was the "papists" who finally helped me to understand my own heritage. I am reminded of the lines from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time

In the monastery I was given a new vocabulary so I could begin to understand and to talk about my internal struggles. An important word in this ancient monastic language is "renunciation." According to Mary Margaret Funk OSB, John Cassian (369-435 C.E.) describes the three renunciations necessary for any one of a serious spiritual path.

First, a renunciation of one's former way of life is critical. For fourth-century Christians this often meant leaving home and fleeing to the desert. For me it meant leaving the Calvinist/Evangelical subculture I had been located in for forty years. I fled first to the Episcopal church and later (for retreats and instruction) to a Benedictine monastery in Indiana.

Second is a renunciation of thoughts that rise unbidden from the unconscious mind. This is necessary since one's former way of life can follow one about in one's head. My monastic spiritual director informed me that until I mastered my thoughts I was not going to be capable of prayer. Cassian lists specific thoughts that must be rejected, thoughts about: food, sex, things, anger, dejection, acedia (soul sick-

ness), vainglory and pride. Although I struggled as times with all these thoughts, I struggled especially with vainglory. Let me illustrate with one of my favorite C. S. Lewis Narnia tales—*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

In this story a very bad, shall we say, dysfunctional boy has become a dragon. Underneath the dragon skin the real boy is very sorry and very scared. Only Aslan the lion can remove the dragon skin and then, only if the boy agrees. It is a painful process to remove a dragon skin and as Aslan's

I am
left with
a very
simple
belief in a
loving
God.

sharp claw rips away the first of a series of dragon skins, the boy cries but agrees to the undressing. I came to know just how that boy felt, for I too had a series of dragon skins collected over forty years of being a some-body in the church, an example, a teacher, a leader. I had become attached to my own goodness and Biblical knowledge—a common snare for pious people. It is insidious and hard to see when externally the behaviors are so good, the understanding of theology so extensive. Cassian called this vainglory—good

deeds done for wrong reasons, done to gain status, power, or a sense of self. Accompanying vainglory is a terrible dryness in the soul.

The third renunciation is the hardest of all. It is the renunciation of one's thoughts about God. Mary Margaret Funk states, "Since God is beyond all images, thoughts, and concepts, then we must renounce our cherished beliefs for the sake of loving God as God." Given my heritage, I had more than a few cherished beliefs. There have been many dark days and nights when I felt I was lost in the "cloud of unknowing." What I am left with is a very simple belief in a loving God.

My explorations have been difficult at times, but I think I am finally getting it—that my life has meaning when I am in the presence of God, "glorifying and enjoying" as the old catechism puts it. As I understand it, that is what the spiritual life is all about.

The intent of the poetic/photographic essay which follows is to share something of my explorations and renunciations over the past twelve years which have led me to the contemplative practices as a way of life. Five years ago, after journaling for many years, my illegible musings started to arrange themselves into contemplative poems, many with a nature theme. I have edited a number of these poems for this essay and paired them with black and white nature photographs. Like poetry, photography is a new practice for me and has also emerged as a part of my spiritual journey. Writing poetry, studying the light, and entering into the silence of the darkroom have become for me spiritual practices.

Life Carelessly Consumed

The time has come to enter
the place of tears,
the dark cocoon
where the shards of life
pierce to the innermost being.
Come, heavy bellied worm
who has grazed long
among the sharp needles of the pine.
Come, ponder life carelessly consumed.
And come, you who suckle on thorns,
enter into the womb of tears
to wait for a season
in dreamless darkness.



Sara Wuthnow

Roots by the Waters

Morning finds the woman waiting, thin haunches on a cold rock, beside the spring-fed stream watching the light shimmer on the rapids. She knows the beat of the whirlpools and eddies, the frenzied rhythm of the rushing waters.

But she has come to seek darker, deeper waters flowing silent over silken silt, to contemplate quiet waters mirroring ancient gnarled roots to listen to the mournful morning sounds of the dove.



Sara Wuthnow

Swinging Door

At the monastery, I am told, they can take people right off the street and teach them

to breathe

to make a throat into a swinging door*

to inhale deeply allowing the wind to blow through infinite space until, like Teresa,** the resolute find the chamber

where the door swings the other way and they find themselves back on the street again

exhaling into a limitless universe filled with the rushing wind

^{*} After Zen master Shunryu Suzuki

^{**}St. Teresa of Avila



Sara Wuthnow

Innocence Without Virtue

Innocence without virtue

until the rough rock is handed over to the discipline of the sea to be battered and buffeted into a bright pebble

Innocence without virtue

until the virgin cloth is handed over to the practice of the fuller who does violence with clay bleaching the unblemished

Innocence without virtue

until the celibate monk is handed over to the torment of his thoughts, a red-hot brand which marks the heart of the chaste*

^{*}After John Cassian



Sara Wuthnow

Old Men Ought to be Explorers*

When I arrive, you reach out with a large, familiar hand, still surprisingly strong, a workman's hand, I think, not a professor's. I am sickened by the sight of yet another shunt, curled up like a worm, under your loose, bruised skin a strait through which blood sails out dark with toxins, into a saline bath.

Don't leave just yet I still need you!

"My anchor's not holding," you whisper, as if you have set sail, like an aging Viking and are lost on some distant sea. But you are not an explorer—you stay at home and cook goulash, you go to synod and keep quiet, you are predictable, a fixed point. So why this urge to travel, to weigh anchor after 80 years?

Careful, do you not know there are dragons in those waters!

You cry, trembling violently as you face into the stiff winds—"fresh air for both of us," you say, trying to comfort me in your doubt.

And for a moment as I kneel, holding you, I too feel the cold slap of the sea.

You seem alert, a foreign look in your eye and it occurs to me, you are quite pleased to be an old man gone exploring.



Sara Wuthnow

Vespers

In the deep velvety blue of winter's twilight the geese across the field take their cue and rise in ragged lines from their supper to wing their way home calling out vespers like discordant monks before settling into the 'grand silence'* of the deepening night.

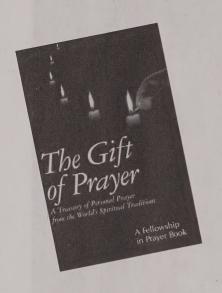
*monastic term



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